

T H E

## L O U N G E R.

[ N<sup>o</sup> XXXIX.]

Saturday, Oct. 29. 1785.

*A Judge is just, a Chancellor juster still,  
A Gownman learn'd, a Bishop what you will,  
Wise, if a Minister, &c.*

POPE.

IT is an old, and has been a frequent observation, that men of genius seldom succeed in the common business of life. I have no where, however, found it so happily illustrated, as by a question of Swift's, in a letter to Lord Bolingbroke,—“Did you “never (says he) observe one of your clerks cutting his paper “with a blunt ivory knife? Did you ever know the knife fail “to go the right way? whereas, if you had used a razor or a “pen-knife, you had odds against you of spoiling a whole “sheet.”

The very idea of genius and of fine parts, implies that they should be rare and uncommon. The ordinary course of society, therefore, has not been left to depend upon them; but it has been wisely ordered, that the business of life, almost in all its departments, should admit of being carried on by such men, and with such talents, as are every day to be met with.

The unexperienced and the vulgar are apt to judge of talents from the success with which they are attended; to estimate the difficulty of situations from their supposed importance, or from the attention which they draw, and the rank which they confer in society.

With them, the lawyer or the physician who has obtained high reputation, or arrived at high practice, is concluded to possess more than ordinary talents for his profession; and if a person has commanded an army or a fleet with success; if he has figured in either House of Parliament; if he has made himself of importance to government, and filled a high department in the state; the public set no bounds to their admiration, and every one concludes the genius and talents of such a man to be of the highest magnitude.

When we resist, however, the glare of success, and the impression of public opinion, and call experience to our aid in the examination of particular instances, we shall find not only that all these situations have been attained, but that they have been filled, with credit to the possessors, and satisfaction to

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the public, by men whose talents and whose virtues were no ways extraordinary. Nay, perhaps, on a closer investigation, we shall be convinced, that such persons owed to the mediocrity of their talents, and the defects or weaknesses of their character, that elevation which to many has appeared the attainment of genius, and the reward of virtue.

*Lelius* possessed uncommon talents. He derived from nature a correct judgement, a sound and penetrating understanding; and his natural endowments were cultivated by a liberal education, an early acquaintance with the best writers, and a familiar intercourse with men of genius and of letters. There were few branches of public or of national business, respecting which he was not possessed of ample information. His views with regard to them were always liberal, generally profound, and seldom failed of being just and well founded.

As a speaker, Lelius seldom addressed himself to the passions or the fancy of his audience. He had, however, an easy and unembarrassed elocution, a sufficient command of language to communicate his views with clearness and perspicuity. His style, though simple and unadorned, was pure and correct; and his manner, though plain, was forcible and manly. He had obtained a seat in the House of Commons at a time of life when his reputation for knowledge was generally established, when his talents were in their fullest vigour; and if at any time he offered his sentiments, he never failed of being listened to with attention, or of finding them received with that respect to which they were so well intitled.

The talents of Lelius, however, were of a kind which very seldom disposed him to make that effort. Accustomed to investigate with accuracy, to view his subject in every possible light, and to see the force of every difficulty which presented itself, he was not easily satisfied with the extent of his information, or convinced of the justice of his opinions; and men of more limited views and shallower understandings, but of bolder or of rasher spirits, were generally allowed to carry away the reputation of that knowledge, and of those talents, the extent of which would not allow Lelius to display them.

*Cornelius* had obtained an education equally liberal, and had the same opportunities to improve himself, by books and conversation; nor were his knowledge and information less extensive than that of Lelius. He was not perhaps altogether his equal in acuteness of understanding or strength of judgement; but if he fell short in these, he no less surpassed him in a brilliancy of fancy and vigour of imagination, improved by an early acquaintance with whatever is beautiful or sublime in the classical productions of ancient or of modern times.

Full of sentiment and of feeling enlivened by fancy, enriched by imagery, and often flowing in a style of the most classic beauty, the eloquence of Cornelius could not fail to command attention, and to be listened to with pleasure.

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But while his knowledge and his eloquence gained to Cornelius the reputation of an accomplished scholar, and a fine speaker, his ideas were often too refined, and his views too loose for business. His eloquence lost its power of persuasion, from an idea that it was calculated to dazzle rather than to inform; and though he often spoke with applause, and sometimes with success, it never procured him the reputation of a man of business, or raised him to any considerable share of public trust or public power. If it had, we should in all probability have seen how widely that fancy and imagination, by which Cornelius was so well qualified to display supposed advantages or blemishes in the measures and the conduct of others, differs from that cool judgement and those plain talents which are fit to direct men in the choice of their own.

*Claudius* had neither the profound knowledge of Lelius, nor the genius and imagination of Cornelius, and he had received an education much less liberal than that of either.

Claudius, however, with little knowledge, no fineness of genius, and a taste altogether uncultivated, had derived from nature a quickness of parts and readiness of apprehension, which for the common purposes of life are of inestimable advantage. The reach of his understanding and the range of his ideas were limited; but it was an understanding of that kind which within these limits discerned its object with clearness, and formed its opinions on all occasions with celerity and decision.

*Claudius's* eloquence could neither compare in purity or correctness with that of Lelius, nor in eloquence and beauty with that of Cornelius. The same cast of mind, however, which gave to *Claudius* a quickness in forming his opinions, gave him a readiness in calling up and bringing together those views and arguments which seemed fitted to support them, as well as a facility of cloathing those ideas in language, which, though generally incorrect, and seldom elegant, was always clear, and derived from the sanguine and ardent mind of the speaker a certain degree of warmth and force, the effects of which in a popular assembly are often found superior to the justest reasoning, and the most finished eloquence.

If the speeches of *Claudius* were less beautiful than those of Cornelius, they seldom wandered from the subject; and they were not only better adapted to their object, but had more the appearance of plainness and sincerity. Though they afforded less pleasure, they had a stronger tendency to convince; and had often credit for more solidity, not from their greater weight of argument, but from a want of those ornaments by which the arguments of Cornelius were accompanied. If he thought with less precision, and had less knowledge of his subject than Lelius, he never hesitated like him, amidst the labour of illustration, or with an anxiousness for perspicuity, but pressed forward on his hearers with a boldness which they often mistook for proof, and a confidence that passed for demonstration.

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The same turn of mind which ensured the success of Claudius as a speaker, not only obtained him a higher reputation, but in reality conferred upon him a greater capacity for the conduct of public business, for the ordinary detail of which his plain good sense was more adapted, than the lively fancy and fine genius of Cornelius; and his bold and decisive temper better fitted, than that understanding which in Lelius was attended with an indecision, an undetermined anxiety, which the hurry of business, and the course of affairs will not admit of.

On a review of these characters therefore, while we respect the superior understanding of Lelius, and admire the fine genius and accomplishments of Cornelius, we at the same time see that they were less fitted for the conduct of affairs, and the bustle of life, than the active, though less profound understanding, and the sound, though less brilliant and less cultivated talents of Claudius. We easily perceive why these not only did, but why they were likely, and indeed intitled to confer superior success in the attainment of those objects at which they had chosen to aspire.

Such examples I believe almost every period would afford, if of every period we were able to collect the history from impartial and unbiased testimony. Were the characters of those who have attained stations of eminence always drawn by well informed or faithful regulators, whose views were not dazzled by grandeur, or their praise secured by patronage, we should find the elevation of such men ascribable to talents of a much lower rank than those lofty attributes with which their panegyrists invest them; and could the unsuccessful find historians, their relations would frequently convince us, that, independently of the numberless accidents which disturb the course of society, and disappoint the best-founded hopes, and most probable means of success, even in those departments of life where genius and talents may be supposed most necessary, men are as apt to fail from too large as from too small a share of those envied endowments.

And if we take into the account that dignity of soul, often the attendant of high talents, which places them above the accommodating compliances of inferior minds; or the effect of those delicate feelings from which the man of genius will often find himself hurt by incidents to which common spirits can easily submit; we shall discover many additional sources of that disappointment which he is apt to meet with, and be still more satisfied, that superior talents and fine genius are instruments too finely tempered for the common drudgery of life, and were not meant to reap their reward from the successful pursuit of business or ambition.

## E D I N B U R G H:

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